

## Common Indicators

Each individual with dyslexia exhibits a unique set of characteristics that defines his learning skills. No two students are the same. However, there are a number of common indicators of dyslexia that may manifest themselves from a mild to severe degree. These indicators fall into several categories of skills including oral language, reading, spelling, writing, organization, and math. Familiarity with these indicators of difficulty in various categories may help educators and parents understand a student's behaviors. Students with dyslexia may have difficulty with:

**Oral language:** Students with dyslexia may have a history of delayed language or speech development. They may demonstrate poor articulation skills, trouble retrieving words in connected speech, or problems expressing their ideas clearly. Students with dyslexia may also exhibit poor listening skills and challenges following oral direction. Students with oral language difficulties will have trouble following multistep directions in the classroom, sequencing stories, and/or sharing a personal experience with adequate detail for the listener to understand. Expressive language may be characterized by false starts and increased use of filler and indefinite words such as “um”, “you know”, or “like”.

**Phonemic awareness:** Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize that words are composed of individual sounds put together in a sequence. Difficulties in phonemic awareness skills such as rhymes, perception and sequence of sounds in words, segmenting (breaking words into sounds), and blending (combining sounds to make a whole word) are early indicators of later reading difficulty. Examples include:

- “How many sounds do you hear in the word ‘cat’?”
- “Say ‘baseball’ without ‘base’.”
- “Say ‘clamp’ without ‘/k/’.”
- “Change the first sound in ‘mat’ to /s/.”

Detecting and generating rhyme, a crucial phonemic awareness skill, and understanding of the “alphabetic principle” (letters represent phonemes or sounds) are key components to later reading and spelling success.

**Decoding:** Difficulty automatically associating letters to their corresponding sounds and difficulty sequencing letters or sounds in words, may indicate reading problems. When decoding, students may show confusion between letters or words that look similar (“horse” for “house”). A student will often misread or omit small words in a sentence or passage, delete or change syllables of words (“ducuz” for “because”, “bargage for garbage”). Slow, laborious reading may lead to poor recall of what was read and inability to make inferences from the passage.

**Spelling:** Students with dyslexia almost always have difficulty with spelling. They may omit speech sounds (e.g., “afr” for “after”), write the wrong letters for sounds used (e.g., “tpe” for “trip”), and demonstrate poor recall for familiar, small, frequently used words (e.g. was, as, when, where, come, been, what, does, said). Non-phonetic words (e.g. could, does, sure) and homonyms (e.g. their, they’re, there) pose a persistent challenge for these students.

**Writing:** Many students with dyslexia can be highly verbal with a large vocabulary; however, this may not be evident in their written work. Often these students have good ideas, but are not able to express them coherently in their writing due to poor handwriting, awkward pencil grip, poor letter formation, difficulty spacing letters, and/or letter reversals. The student’s writing does not reflect advanced oral language expression.

**Mathematics:** Problems in math may be manifested in difficulty learning math vocabulary and/or concepts, limited ability to memorize math facts or formulas, difficulty discriminating between similar sounding numbers (such as 13 as 30, 15 as 50), and difficulty copying problems or keeping numbers aligned. Students with dyslexia may be slower to learn to tell time or to sequence days of the week, months of the year, and seasons. Frequent calculation errors may also be observed. Additionally, interpretation of language in word problems can present challenges.

**Organization of time, materials and space:** In addition to weaknesses in reading, writing, and spelling, students with dyslexia may exhibit weak organizational skills such as difficulty remembering homework assignments, disorganized work space, poor time management skills, and a slow

laborious work process (these students see the final product, but can't get started). The student may become overwhelmed with too much information. Students with dyslexia often confuse spatial directions and have difficulty learning left and right. They usually require repeated teaching in order to fully grasp concepts. They often demonstrate inconsistent performance in school, work, and other tasks.

**Social and emotional development:** Consistent and persistent struggles in school can lead to significant concerns in a student's social and emotional development. These students have often experienced repeated failure in the classroom while watching their peers develop skills more quickly and easily. Students with dyslexia may misunderstand messages from others because they are unable to interpret the meaning of non-verbal messages. Language processing difficulties and poor understanding of figurative expressions may lead to very literal interpretations of the message. These students may misinterpret humor, figurative language, or innuendo.

There are a number of indicators that profile a student with dyslexia, but it is also important to identify their strengths. Dr. Sally Shaywitz at Yale University's Center for Study of Learning and Attention calls dyslexia an "encapsulated weakness surrounded by a sea of strengths". Dyslexic students are often described as creative, innovative thinkers with general knowledge, vocabulary, and reasoning skills in the average to above average range. Many of these students think outside the box, come up with novel solutions to problems, and are hands-on learners.